**UNIT 4 : WRITING SKILLS**

**Content**

* Note taking and note making
* Summarising information
  + Techniques of summarizing
* Use of layout
* Removing unnecessary words (Reducing sentences)
* Shortening Words (Abbreviations)
* Removing inessential information
* Shortening sentences (Substitution)
* Organising information in written texts
* Writing reports
* Position papers

**Note taking and note making**

What is the difference between taking and making notes?

You **take** notes in lectures or seminars, writing down what other people are saying for future reference.

You **make** notes from reading books, journals, any form of text. In this case it is important that you do not plagiarise without meaning to, so record the reference before you make any notes, and make sure you use quotation marks “...” if copying.

Being able to produce useful notes is a very important skill that will help you throughout your time at college.

**What is a Summary?**

A Summary is a shortened version of something read or heard.

Summaries of written texts should convey all or most of a section of text using a reduced number of words. You use summarizing skills all the time in oral communication situations. The written summary is also not new to you as it is something most of us have done throughout our school days. However, it is rare in business organizations to be asked to do a straight forward continuous prose summary. Summaries in business may be written in the form of an advertisement or notice, an article for the in-house journal or a handout for distribution to trainees. These are all exercises in summarizing, picking out relevant and important information and presenting it in an appropriate manner.

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**Types of Summary**

Summaries can be in:

* Note form; or
* Continuous prose

Tables, charts, graphs and diagrams are also ways in which information is presented in a summarized form.

**Techniques of summarising**

There are many different techniques used in summarizing and note making/taking. In this unit we will look at five ways:

* Using layout to show relationship between sections of information
* Removing unnecessary words i.e. reducing phrases/sentences
* Reducing the number of letters in words (abbreviating) or using symbols instead
* Removing inessential information
* Shortening sentences by substituting

**Using layout**

The following are the layout features for notes

1 Headings

* Main heading for the topic covered, clearly marked by the use of capitals, underlining etc.
* Sub- headings for divisions in the main topic. These are normally different from main headings. E.g., main headings in capitals, while sub-headings in lower case letters with underlining.

1. Indenting – This is setting subsidiary sections of information a little to the right of the main sections so that they are easily noticed.
2. Numbering – Sections and sub-sections stand out clearly if they are numbered systematically. Arabic numbers (1, 2, 3, etc) may be used for main headings, with or without decimal numbering. If decimal numbering it not used, Roman numbers (i, ii, iii, iv etc) or letters of the alphabet (a, b, c, etc) can be used for sub sections.
3. Marking points – Individual points of information under a single heading should be marked by using symbols such as dashes or bullets etc. Sometimes portions of text may be in italics, bold or underlined.

**Removing unnecessary words (reducing sentences)**

In any language normal sentences contain more words or part-words than are absolutely necessary in order to communicate information. Look at this sentence:

‘The typing paper is in the third drawer.’

We could communicate the same information simply by saying:

‘Typing paper in third drawer.’ although this is not a fully grammatical sentence of English.

Because languages use rather more words than are necessary it is always possible to produce a shorter version of a sentence which is still adequate for basic communication. This is done regularly in certain familiar situations.

Newspaper headlines and hasty message all cut out unnecessary words in order to save space, time and money.

The types of word that can be left out of a sentence (in any language) are those which carry virtually no meaning of their own, and are as a result predictable from the remaining words. In English the main types of word that can be left out are:

ARTICLES - the, a/an, some, this, those, etc

AUXILIARY VERBS - is, are, have, has, do, does, etc

MAIN VERB ‘be’ - (e.g. ‘John is a policeman’)

PRONOUNS - I, you, he, him, they, them, who, which, etc

PREPOSITIONS - at, in, up, through, for, etc

(sometimes – not always)

The words that can be left out are also referred to as function words whereas those that are maintained are called content words.

CONTENT WORDS FUNCTION WORDS

Content words carry the meaning of the sentence. Function words carry very little meaning. They are used to link

the content words together to form

complete sentences.

In the last sentence the content words are: In the last sentence the function words are:

CONTENT WORDS CARRY MEANING THEY ARE TO THE TOGETHER

SENTENCE TO

Note: It is possible to understand the meaning Note: It is impossible to understand of the sentence from the content words alone. the meaning of the sentence from the function words alone.

Function words should, however, be included in messages if leaving them out would lead to confusion or misunderstanding.

e.g. ‘Plans changed unexpectedly’ could be:

a) My plans have been changed unexpectedly.

b) Her plans have been changed unexpectedly.

Another way of reducing sentences is shown in the following sentences:

1 a) There’s a book lying on the table

b) There’s a book on the table

2 a) He holds the position of Chief Accountant

b) He is the Chief Accountant

3 a) What we want to do is set off before the rain starts

b) We want to set off before it rains

In each case the second sentence is a simpler and shorter version of the first, but little information is lost.

**Reducing the number of letters in words (abbreviating) or using symbols**

When you want to take notes from an oral source, you will always need to write fast. It would be helpful if you could write in shorthand but failure to that, you should learn to abbreviate words or use symbols instead.

You may have developed your own personal abbreviations and symbols for use in your personal notes. The following is a list of some commonly used symbols:

↗ increase, greater, growth

→ leads to, causes, results in

↔ connected to, is related to

@ each, at (a rate), valued at

% percent (age)

< smaller than, less than

> greater than

↙ decrease, reduction, less

& and

= equal (s)

≠ not equal

**Some standard abbreviations**

Account a/c, acc

Approximately approx

Compare cf

Minimum min

For example e.g.

Number no.

Hour hr

That is i.e.

Department dept

Maximum max

**Removing inessential information**

Summarizing anything requires you to identify and remove unimportant details. A lot of information which can be removed from summarizing exercises can be categorized as follows: examples, definitions, additions and rephrasing. You will be able to identify these categories of information by the way they are introduced in the text. ‘Clues’ are often given as shown below:

Categories Clues

1. Examples ‘for example…..’

‘ …e.g.…’

1. Definitions ‘This is ...’

‘This means...’

1. Rephrasing ‘In other words…’

‘That is…’

1. Additions ‘…, especially...’

‘..., particularly...’

**Example:**

It has been argued, (1) especially in recent years, that an examination summary is not a realistic exercise, (2) i.e. not the type of summary one is required to do in the business world.

(the information to be removed has been underlined)

The reason for removing number (1) is that it is an addition. The clue is the word ‘especially.’ The reason for removing number (2) is that it is an example. The clue is the ‘i.e.’.

The sentence can therefore, stand as:

‘It has been argued that an examination summary is not a realistic exercise’.

**Shortening Sentences by Substituting**

Another way of shortening sentences is by replacing phrases with single words. There are many expressions in the English language which are long-winded and could be expressed in a shorter way. The following are some of the more common ones:

1. In the near future ------------- soon
2. Put up with ------------- tolerate
3. As a result ------------- consequently
4. A lot of ------------- many
5. At all times ------------- always
6. At this moment in time now
7. Throughout the world ---------------- world-wide
8. For the time being ---------------- temporarily
9. As soon as possible ---------------- soonest
10. Without delay ---------------- immediately

You are therefore saying the same thing but in not so many words.

**Writing Reports**

In business, various reports are produced as they serve so many purposes and because of this, reports vary in content, organization, format and style.

We can start by asking:

**What is a Report?**

There are several ways to answer the question depending on the context the report is supposed to serve. It can be defined as follows:

1. A document in which a situation is examined by one person or several for the purpose of presenting information or facts for use by other people;
2. A document which records information; As well as giving information it may report findings or make policy recommendations;
3. A document containing findings, conclusions, and recommendations arising from an investigation, for the purpose of presenting information or facts for use by people who may need it.

The above definitions relate to written reports, but you should note that reports can be either oral or written.

**Classification:**

Reports may be classified on the basis of:

1. Format – essay, memo, letter, form or schematic
2. Frequency – daily, weekly, fortnightly quarterly, bi-annually, monthly, annually.
3. Length – long or short
4. Purpose – investigative or information

Reports can either be formal or informal depending on the readership and the relationship between the author(s) and the reader(s).

**Stages in producing a report:**

There are six stages in producing a report:

Stage I: Understanding the terms of reference

Stage II: Preparing and collecting the material

Stage III: Arranging the material

Stage IV: Writing Draft Report

Stage V: Revising the report

Stage VI: Presentation

Stage I: Understanding the terms of reference:

Find out exactly what you have been asked to do. In other words, try to get concise terms of reference

Stage II: Preparing and collecting the material:

Establish clearly in your mind the subject, scope and purpose of your report. The purpose will generally be:

1. To give information, either detailed or general
2. To report findings
3. To put forward ideas
4. To recommend a course of action

It may sometimes be combination of these.

Your Reader - Ask Yourself:

1. What does my reader want to know?
2. What does he/she know already?
3. Does he/she understand technical language?
4. How will she/he want to use my report?
5. Is her/his outlook administrative or technical?

Your Material

1. Collect facts and ideas about your subject by observing (on the spot check) Interviews, questionnaire, surveys, reading (texts on the subject), etc.
2. Write them down in note form. If it is possible at this stage to put them into some kind of order or to divide them into categories, then do so.
3. Check your facts for accuracy.
4. Consider them closely and make any deductions.

Stage III: Arrangement

1. When the material has been collected, it then has to be arranged for presentation in the report. The report has to be built up in a systematic manner so as to lead the reader from the statement of the problem, through the investigation, to the conclusions, in a way which will appear progressive and logical.

In order to achieve this effect, the report is best constructed in the following sections:

1. Title: A general indication of the subject of the report providing immediate identification of the report.
2. Introduction – An introduction of the subject including the purpose of the report, the background to the report and the scope to be covered. (terms of reference and the plan of the report). When indicating the terms of reference, the job given to the author(s) of the report is clearly and briefly set out. The precise scope of the report should be stated: e.g working of the present loan scheme as it applies to students. The loan of books to lecturing staff was excluded from our terms of reference. It is also necessary to state whether recommendations were or were not asked for.
3. Procedure- An outline of the method(s) employed to collect information/opinions: i.e by reading documents, by interviews; by visits, by considering previous history etc.
4. Findings – The details of the information/opinion/data, may be divided into various sections with headings and sub-headings depending upon the amount of information to be presented. Findings may be itemized if this seems to be the best method of presentation.
5. Conclusions – Specific implication(s) drawn from the findings. A summary based on the findings.
6. Recommendations – Suggestions on how to solve the problem(s) outlined in the report. These are based on conclusions and may even correspond with conclusions. They may also be itemized;
7. Appendixes:

In order to maintain the even flow of your report (so enabling the reader to follow the main line of thought without interruption), you may have to make use of appendices. Statistical tables, charts, diagrams and sketch-maps should not normally be included in the main body of the report. They should be put together at the end as appendices. You can then refer to each appendix at the appropriate point in the report.

Stage IV: Writing

1. The Draft Copy

When you have decided on the best arrangement for your report, you can then begin to write it. It is essential to write it in draft first of all : use double spacing so as to leave room for amendments.

1. Style:

A straightforward, lucid style is best. Normally you will present the facts in a balanced fashion giving the proposals. A challenging or controversial method may sometimes be justified, particularly if you are trying to “sell” your ideas to your readers, but you must always be careful to distinguish opinion from fact.

Stage V: Revision

1. After the draft report has been written, it will require re-reading and revision. Make sure all the corrections are done at this stage, for example, is your report self-contained and self-explanatory? It should not normally be necessary for your reader to have to refer constantly to other reports or other documents.
2. Examine your text in detail. Check grammar, spelling and punctuation.
3. See that paragraphs are numbered consistently.
4. If possible, have your draft checked by a person qualified to give constructive advice.

Stage VI: Presentation

After the necessary corrections have been made, you will now produce a final draft to be submitted to the person who requested for the report. If it is a superior who had requested for the report, remember to submit it with a covering minute.

**Components of a Long Report**

a) Title page

b) Table of contents (with page numbers of where to find information)

c) Abstract/synopsis/ executive summary

d) Terms of reference/ introduction

e) Procedures

f) Findings

g) Conclusions

h) Recommendations

i) Appendices

j) Bibliography/references

Your report might also have the following:

* Foreword
* Preface
* Acknowledgements
* Dedication
* Glossary
* Index
* Abbreviations

**Writing Position Papers**

**Definition:** A position paper is a written document that presents an opinion about an issue.

The purpose of a position paper is to generate support on an issue, or to provide a foundation for finding solutions to problems. It therefore describes a position on an issue and the rationale for that position. In the paper one should:

* Present the position or prevailing situation as it is (dates and events may be used as evidence to support the position stated)
* Examine the strengths and weaknesses of the position
* Evaluate possible solutions and suggest courses of action

**Structure of a typical position paper**

**Introduction**

* Identification of the issue
* Statement of the position

**The body**

* Background information
* Supporting evidence or facts
* A discussion of both sides of the issue

**Conclusion**

* Suggested courses of action
* Possible solutions